

DISPUTATION - CITIZEN AND SOCIETY

We received several reactions from Slovakia and elsewhere to our Disputation Question first published in **K&K** 1/97. In addition, we offer you the famous letter by the black civil rights activist, Martin Luther King written in Birmingham prison. In his letter he explains to his colleagues why he, as a peace loving Christian with a clear conscience, supports civil disobedience.

CITIZEN AND SOCIETY

The cause of our current crisis in Slovakia is the absence of any kind of dialogue among politically divided groups. Without dialogue there is no way to find a compromise, civilized political rules of conduct cannot be set, and thus no individual is able to maintain a neutral stance. As soon as one opens his or her mouth and expresses a view, he or she is immediately placed on one side or the other of the barricade. There is no position in Slovakia today in which one can stand above the dispute. An impartial or neutral position, set apart from such ideologies as liberalism, fascism or communism, does not presuppose a set of doctrines or principles to refer to. Such a stance, "in the middle" or "in between", can be maintained only if two or more parties are willing to negotiate among themselves.

Yet, what topic of conversation might one raise with a decent individual in Slovakia, when it seems that a common civic sense will not develop in their country for quite some time? What should be the topic - how to survive in the current situation, how to escape it, how to confront it, or how to try to carry on a dialogue with those who refuse to hold one? One still wonders how to behave if a majority of the population is indifferent as to whether the rule of law prevails, and is more concerned with its material well-being; when a majority, (often not fully overlapping with the previous one), is afraid to voice its thoughts.

In this condition, urging anyone towards heroic acts smacks of sheer moralizing. The danger stemming from expressing one's own opinion and taking action is something that everyone must weigh for him or herself. It seems that in a society in such tension every position that is taken carries a certain risk. Those who, against their conscience, withdrew and remain indifferent towards public sphere, put themselves in an undignified and certainly nerve-wrecking position. On the other hand, the compact with political power - as always and everywhere - means not only a loss of independence but often loss of face. It is also risky to stand up against the opinion of the majority and, besides, only rarely is it done by an individual acting out of principle. The leaders of the majority can accuse such individuals of undemocratic conduct and to a certain degree rightly so; or they may call him a frustrated die-hard revolutionary seeking power (one can indeed find such cases); or they may accuse him of personal ambitions; or at best, they may laugh at him and label him a Don Quixote naively fighting the twentieth century's "Realpolitik".

This century of ours cannot be viewed in black and white and no one has the right to pass moral judgements on individuals caught in the web of evil, stupidity and politics. One must always ask according to what right and from what motive someone denounces another individual. What might on the surface look like a covenant with the devil might be the latter's cunning way of luring an innocent victim into its demonic scheme.

While reading issue 1/97 of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT**, and particularly the articles about the philosopher Martin Heidegger, you might reflect on the extent to which an individual should be involved in society. Heidegger was a first-rate thinker, who, for at least a while, was involved with an evil regime, and yet created a philosophic oeuvre that had a major impact on many of this century's greatest thinkers. At the same time, in the eyes of many, he failed both as an individual and as a citizen.

The debate about Heidegger and Nazism has grown out of all proportion and the whole issue is viewed as a nuisance and boring by many. Some writers look down upon Heidegger, while others clearly separate his civic and philosophic activities. The former stress the interconnection, between Heidegger's academic work and his civic activities. The latter down-play the personal failures of Heidegger, the man, and admire Heidegger, the philosopher, for being the principal sage of the century.

The whole discussion further confirms that civic virtue in no way increases or decreases in proportion to brain capacity - a genius is equally susceptible to failure as any other individual. Every human being has an equal option and responsibility to take a position towards public affairs. With respect to the position itself, it depends on one's conscience; whether an individual is allowed to decide freely depends on all of us as citizens.

In the second issue (1996) of **KRITIKA & KONTEXT** the responsibility and attitude of intellectuals in a society was debated. During the current period of transition, when democratic structure but not the spirit of democracy is guaranteed, posing a question about the responsibility of only a small group towards society would be neither appropriate nor democratic. During this period the responsibility for building a democratic society, must lie with all citizens - more so than during the Communist era when citizens' choices were limited; more so than in a stable democratic society where there are enough checks and balances to keep democracy relatively safe. The following questions are posed to all, not only the people of Slovakia:

- 1) Should we accept in silence the will of the majority as an imperative, however much it might clash with our conscience? Should we withdraw into our private sphere?
- 2) Should we remain indifferent towards things public and justify such a stance by saying that politics is always nasty and it does not matter what the majority believes or who is in power?
- 3) Should we decide that it is worth the effort to stand behind the beliefs we consider to be the cornerstones of democracy and the rule of law, of decency and tolerance? We should not feel rebuffed after the initial failure and should see democracy not as a matter of winning and losing, but as a continuous process.

In theory, there is no question as to which position any decent individual should and would take, but in reality especially when a society is in crisis, the choices are complex and difficult to make. We consider these questions to be vital - urgent in Slovakia and always relevant elsewhere.

Samuel Abrahám

ALBERT MARENČIN

1) I do not believe that a lie regardless how many times repeated and even accepted by a parliament, can become the truth, that a hundred fools can equal one sage. In other words, I do not believe that a greater number necessarily results in moral superiority and that a majority is necessarily right and in the name of this mathematical justice is designated to rule over a minority. I think that such mathematical understanding of democracy is in sharp contradiction to its spirit which is manifested in union of morals and politics under the rule of law. Where such a unity is lacking, one cannot speak about democracy. The voice of a majority alone does not represent for me a "democratic imperative" that I should follow blindly and obey under all circumstances. I thus refuse to accept a "given circumstance" in the sense that I would be silent even when my moral sensibility commands me to speak out.

2) It is a misfortune for a whole society if politics starts to rot - albeit rare - yet I would not brand with a same negative label all political forces and politicians. Despite the fact that every government and political force rules with coercive power at its disposal, still I am not indifferent to the fact - and no one should remain so - who holds power and how it is being used. Whether the power is used through coercion, arrogance or audacity, or whether with sensibility and respect.

3) I do not consider democracy as a long-term but as a permanent process. More precisely, as a permanent struggle of society with an infinite number of obstructions, small victories and stupendous losses. At the same time, the "beliefs that are considered to be the cornerstones of democracy" should be neither dogmas nor coercively enforced laws, but rather some kind of a measuring stick of societies' objectives, valid for every individual. I am convinced that it always makes sense to defend what we consider to be purpose of our life and of our endeavours.

JIRÍ MELICH

The answer to the second of the three questions asked by Samuel Abraham is for me, unequivocally, No, and to the third, Yes. The first question is a more complicated one (especially in its Slovak wording), and I deal with it last.

Regarding the second and third questions, when the misery of ignorance and immorality of the majority becomes perceived as a threat and a collective betrayal, desperation often drives the honest to look for salvation in alternative individual therapies rather than in collective responsibility and courageous political action. This is particularly true for our part of Europe. Such an evasion of deeper social commitment does not always have to have tragic consequences - an individual can maintain his personal integrity and honesty and survive until another tide of history arrives. Not everyone is able to act courageously and not everyone is capable of explicit political action. Almost everyone, however, is able to commit himself (or herself) to the basic principles of citizenship and humanity. As far as the boundaries between honesty and decency, on the one hand, and betrayal and immorality, on the other hand, are concerned, it is a matter of fact that the most dramatic struggles play out within our consciousness and conscience. Hopefully, we may expect that the regrettable malaise of the majority (as it is perceived in today's Slovakia) has not succeeded in eliminating islands of common sense and networks of communication and solidarity among those capable of more responsible civic and political action. There is a lesson to be learned from our own history, that communication within the islands of resistance is important for the whole of society, since the surrounding pathology may well be self-destructive. (But one cannot rely on such self-destruction, as the process itself might have tragic implications.) Let's not fool ourselves: no matter how important innocence of one's heart or genuineness of one's intentions may be, it does not necessarily mean that a chosen strategy of resistance should not be exposed to continuing self-reflexion. Allow me a remark here: Contrary to Mr. Abraham's notion of Bohumil Hrabal as an example of someone whose greatness and moral purity cannot be diminished by one or several acts of collaboration with the "powers that be", I believe that Hrabal's case is a more complex one. As much as I respect him, we have to admit that his naivete (or perhaps only the goodness of his heart reluctant to fight anything) was sometimes larger than we used to think and led to mistakes perhaps pardonable and forgivable but not entirely beyond criticism.

As far as the first question is concerned, it is to be expected that with a possible change of government, i.e. of the regime in Slovakia in the future (i.e. if the democratic opposition wins the election), some parameters of relationships within society as a whole will inevitably change too; some more so, others less so, and some (especially cultural ones) will not change at all, at least in the short-term horizon. The question is, what the nation should do until then. Should we respect the results of the last elections and accept the reality in silence, that is, withdraw into our private sphere until the next elections? In a certain sense, we have to accept the results of the elections, to live with them. If there is a realistic chance, however, that the next elections may be free and fair in principle, the best strategy and a "must", is to get ready for them (and their aftermath) in a thorough way. It is an old question of "hard" politics or "power" politics, which has often been underestimated by some moralizing intellectuals. The task of securing the most free, fair and transparent elections possible under current conditions (effective information sources and media coverage included) is the paramount task of a democratic opposition. Speaking of the elections, however, we have to bear in mind that they will certainly be only the beginning of a long and difficult journey.

TEODOR MÜNZ

Democracy as the Moral Imperative. My answer to the third question posed by Samuel Abrahám is positive: is it worth the effort to stand behind the beliefs we consider to be cornerstones of democracy and the rule of law, of decency and toleration? I believe it is worthwhile. Why? Because from among three classical forms of government: monarchy, aristocracy and democracy, only democracy corresponds to our current level of human development. Hegel's words are being affirmed in that progress leads from the freedom of one (monarchy) to the freedom of all. Awareness of one's own human dignity is being ever more awakened among the people, we are

getting rid of Patriarchs from various walks of life (even the patriarchal God). We recognize the equality of human rights, a dying patient is being allowed to decide about the termination of his or her life, we are destroying racial prejudices, encouraging toleration etc. - all in all, we are moving towards democracy. Simply, it is a system brought by our time, whether we like it or not.

It binds that which is most natural - that which is undeniable within us (natural inequality, competitiveness or "natural selection") and that which is social and opposes the natural predispositions (equality before the law, equal opportunity for all, freedom but not anarchy, toleration etc.). It must be said, it is a most difficult task to maintain a proper balance between the two opposing forces that continuously sway us in either direction. The problem is increasing freedom that tends to degenerate into anarchy. Moreover, democracy is such a tolerant regime, that it allows its enemies - in spite of laws for its protection - to legally undermine its own foundations. Thus more than anything democracy requires an educated, highly moral and self-conscious citizen. Thus as T.G. Masaryk used to say: "be fearless and do not steal"!

That is also the reason why democracy is also an ideal that is unattainable insofar as it requires eradication of evil from human nature and preservation of good. There is all the more reason why we should not forsake democracy. The ideals are not to be attained but to be striven for. We must be twice as careful not to abandon democracy. We are limping behind and events are passing us by. All those that are fully aware of democracy's benefits have a moral obligation to open eyes that are half or completely blind.

OLEKSII PANICH

Thank you for the invitation to participate in the discussion you began in K&K. The problems you raised in your essay are of great importance, at least for all the countries of the post-soviet area. Indeed, theoretical solutions seem to be quite straight forward. But it also depends on what theory we are talking about.

In my view, today the art of social activity for intellectuals requires above all, awareness of, an monitoring of potential results of involvement in public affairs and cooperation with political power. (Although I agree with Tom Darby [who wrote in **K&K** 3/96] that the term "intellectuals" is "too imprecise", I use it as a loose definition of a certain pole in a social structure - rather than a completely defined social range). I suppose, now it is just a problem of measure, not extremes; anyway, my own experience of participation in the Ukrainian Parliament and Ministry of Education activity (as a member of various sessions, commissions etc.) led me unequivocally to this opinion.

On one hand, such an approach entails addressing the post-Enlightenment tradition of considering the concept of "measure" in Classical German Philosophy. My strong conviction is that without this methodological background we cannot function - "in theory!" - through the simple juxtaposition of absolute extremes (such as relativism or fundamentalism, indifference or collaborationism etc.). The experience of the post-Enlightenment philosophy seems to be here a necessary and natural addition to the ideology of Enlightenment itself, because even historically Classical German Philosophy was simply an attempt to answer the questions which were raised but not solved by the culture of European Enlightenment.

One of these questions was how to unite the "natural law" for the individual with the "natural law" for society as whole. One of the successful attempts to unite them, led in practice to the *Declaration of Independence*; one of the unsuccessful attempts - to the horrors of the French Revolution. If we try to consider both cases together, we could conclude that the very concept of "natural law" is not enough for building a democratic society. It can be understood in many different ways, and, at the same time, quite mythologically - because the culture of Enlightenment was, above all, the culture of "hand-made mythos" and even "hand-made gods" (remember Voltaire's "*Si Dieu n'existait pas, il faudrait l'inventer*", etc.). But any "hand-made mythology", as well as any mythology as such - including the mythology of a single "natural law" - cannot become the basis of an open society and coexistence of people with different "inner visions" (the letter of prof. Pangle in **K&K** 3/96 shows it quite clearly). At this level of "theory" the contradiction between "majority" and "thinking minority" - as well as the contradiction between any people of different convictions - cannot be solved satisfactorily.

Thus, we can presume that the "self-evident truths" proclaimed in the *Declaration of Independence* were just self-evident enough to the American society as a whole, and it was really enough for these concrete historical circumstances - apart from whether these truths are equally self-evident for any another nation and any other time or not. Correspondingly, the highest achievement of the American Founding Fathers seems to have been not the very addressing of the concept of "natural law", but the creation of a suitable formula for human coexistence and cooperation in their society.

We can't expect the theory and concepts of "self-evident truths", and "natural law", to give us a strong basis for finding the best mode of relationship between society (majority) and individual (intellectual) in any historical sense. We need, then, to use another methodology, another and more flexible approach to solving alternative problems - an approach which matches the post-Enlightenment situation in European culture. In my opinion, the first level of such a methodology, was formed by the modern philosophical Dialectics (which surely be considered a specific continuation of the Socratic tradition in Classical German Philosophy). The second level was formed by the modern Philosophy of Dialogue (which is probably the most "Socratic" direction in European philosophical development in the 20. century).

No doubt this philosophical aspect is one of the most sensitive dimensions of the discussion raised in **K&K 3/96** - and at the same time we must take this into account when discussing the questions proposed in **K&K 1/97**. On the other hand, however, one must admit that even the best of theories cannot guarantee that it will be applicable everywhere at any time. Obviously, the spectrum of possible answers to the questions discussed in every case depends on the structure of the individual society - and it's historically possible transformation in the near future.

Let me give here one brief example. In the social structure of the Russian Empire - including the Soviet era - there was room for "intelligentsia" which presented its public face as a constant opponent of the state power. (A Soviet slogan of a "new working intelligentsia" - as part of the State machine - was clearly a *contradictio in adjecto* which reflected no more than the last attempt of the State to intimidate its main challenger within the Empire's society). But there was no room for "intellectuals" who partly cooperated with the State power but at the same time partly kept their distance from it by personal choice. The only possible choice was to serve the State (and to do it completely formally) - or to serve the people directly (and to do it completely informally). Any attempts to find a "middle way" in these historical circumstances ended in failure, or led to a situation of "double moral" and split consciousness.

From this aspect, the culture of the Russo-Soviet Empire really was a culture of extreme opposites - and was a kind of historical necessity. (Typologically, we may define Soviet official culture as the latest mode of the culture of Russian Enlightenment, which corresponds to the cultural situation in France after the Great French Revolution). So, to turn now to the concept of "measure", we may apply it to certain aspects of transformation in the structure of post-Soviet (esp. Ukrainian) society. It allows us flexibility i. e., degree of firmness both theoretically and in every day life.

We return here directly to the phenomena of democracy and open society. And the only thing I'd like to state here is that I see the concept of "measure" to be one of the cornerstones of this type of society - together with the concept of "sceptical respect" which we discussed in our Budapest conference (see section on **Artes Liberales** in this issue). In a way, "the art of measure" is simply art of living in democratic society - and one can't exist without each other. On one hand, it could be the measure of agreement between people of different convictions - and it seems to be the only way between the Scylla of intolerance and the Charybdis of indifference. (As far as I understand, it is something similar to the Socratic tradition as described by Peter Sýkora in his contribution to the discussion in **K&K 3/96**); and on the other, it could be the measure of cooperation between "nasty" power and "pure" intellectuals (the question you raised in your essay in **K&K 1/97**). But without "measure" we shall get in each case not more than two irreconcilable extremes which are already today "both worse".

The difficulty in responding to the questions posed in your last issue is not in choosing simple yes-or-no answers. Of course, we should not accept in silence the will of the majority, nor should we remain indifferent to things public, but should rather decide that it is indeed worth the effort to stand behind cornerstone beliefs in democracy and the rule of law. The trouble begins to appear in framing specific responses to specific situations under these quite general headings.

Problems arise because the straightforward principled response may be less effective in affirming the principle than the indirect or nuanced response. Max Weber recognized this kind of problem when he distinguished between the "ethic of responsibility" and the "ethic of ultimate ends": the "ethic of responsibility" examines the real world consequences of political actions, which may produce opposite effects from those intended, while the ethic of ultimate ends declares, with Martin Luther: "Here I stand; I can do no other." The two ethics are not, in Weber's view, alternatives, but rather complements, and the individual who chooses to act according to the ethic of ultimate ends (only after responsibly considering all the consequences of his actions) has what Weber praises as the "calling for politics."

Clearly, there are no general formulas for political decision-making. Working out specific courses of political action is a fascinating and frustrating business for the student of the political process - fascinating because the possibilities are endless, frustrating because "dead ends" are scattered across the political landscape.

If the ordinary citizen feels that participation in the political process is too frustrating to be endured; he/she must be reminded that it is at least equally so for the politician, even at the highest levels of political life. The American president, Harry Truman, described his job as trying to persuade his colleagues to do what is in their long-range self interest to do. American presidents from Abraham Lincoln to Lyndon Johnson have been castigated as opportunists. But it would be more accurate to say that they never embraced a goal until they had found a path that had at least a reasonable chance of leading them to it.

It is the complexity and the "messiness" of the political process in democracy, the contingent nature of every decision, that requires an affirmative answer to your three questions. That affirmation is necessary to sustain the process. You suggest that all citizens have a special responsibility to participate during the initial construction period for a democratic society. But, as Robert Bellah and others have argued, it is not at all clear that even an established society can live on checks and balances alone. Such a society must also affirm its commitment to common ideals.

Affirmative answers to your three questions are essential to provide the necessary impetus to press on with the democratic process. But it would be a mistake to think that affirmative answers contain instructions on how to make that process work.

I would like to suggest a set of follow-up questions, to be asked when a specific political decision is taking shape - or failing to take shape:

How can men and women of good will shape a working majority on this issue that will not clash with our conscience, but rather embody it? How can we transform a coalition of special interests (even "nasty" ones) so that it responds to the needs of society as a whole? How can we give recognition to the "cornerstone" principles of democracy in this particular decision-making event, without losing our working majority?

These new questions can only be addressed after we have answered your first three questions with a ringing affirmative. But before the echoes of that affirmation have died away, we need to go about the patient, difficult work of seeking answers to the next set of questions.

The statement by Joseph Schumpeter that you have chosen as a maxim is a good beginning. Once you accept the relative validity of your convictions (while still standing for them "unflinchingly") you must recognize the need for dialogue, for accommodation, for reconceptualization in order to make the political process work in a democratic society, at every stage of its development.

